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Acute bacterial meningitis: time for a better outcome

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Between 1935 and the mid-fifties, the fatality rate from acute bacterial meningitis decreased impressively from 85% to 37% [1]. This striking reduction was clearly due to the introduction of antimicrobial agents [1]. However, between the sixties and the mid-nineties, the prognosis did not substantially improve and the mortality rate remained roughly stable at 20–25% [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. It is unclear why there was no further improvement of the prognosis during three decades, despite new and more potent antibiotics such as third generation cephalosporins (ceftriaxone, cefotaxime) and despite broader availability of, and more sophisticated, critical care medicine.

During the past two decades, important progress has been made in understanding the pathogenesis of meningitis [8, 9, 10]. The mechanisms of neuro-invasion and inflammation have been elucidated. The pathogenesis of cortical necrosis on the one hand and hippocampal apoptosis on the other have been studied. It has been shown that oxidative radicals play a crucial and noxious role for cerebral blood flow and consecutive cortical brain damage. In addition, the complex effects of nitric oxide have been analyzed. Interestingly, depending on the stage of bacterial meningitis, inhibition of nitric oxide synthase can either diminish or aggravate cerebral blood flow and consecutively result in brain damage [8 for review]. Since hippocampal apoptosis leads to neurologic sequelae or even death, the underlying mechanisms of apoptosis have been studied. In brief, inhibition of matrix metalloproteinases and TNF-alpha converting enzyme was experimentally beneficial, whereas corticosteroids and radical oxygen scavengers even aggravated apoptosis [11, 12]. In view of these complex effects, even in the well defined setting of experimental pneumococcal meningitis, it is not astonishing that these experimental data have not yet translated into improved outcome of meningitis in humans.

Table 1 summarizes the fatality rates of patients with meningitis during various successive time periods from

Table 1 Fatality rates of bacterial meningitis during the last 40 years

| Time period | Overall (%) | Due to <i>Streptococcus pneumoniae</i> (%) | Author |
|-------------|-------------|--|----------------------------|
| 1962–88 | 25 | 28.5 | Durand et al. [2] |
| 1970–95 | 27 | Not reported | Aronin et al. [3] |
| 1978–81 | 13.2 | 26.3 | Schlech et al. [4] |
| 1975–94 | 19.7 | 25.9 | Sigurdardottir et al. [5] |
| 1985–96 | 18 | 26 | Hussein et al. [6] |
| 1994–95 | 13.3 | 21 | Schuchat et al. [7] |
| 1993–01 | 15 | 34 | De Gans et al. [13] |
| | 7 | 14 | |
| 1995–00 | 10.9 | <16* | Flores-Cordero et al. [14] |

*16% unfavorable outcome (neurologic sequelae and death)

1962–2001. Whereas the overall mortality varied by up to 50% (13.2–27.0%) between 1962–1995, regardless of the study period, mortality due to pneumococcal meningitis remained quite stable, ranging between 21% and 28% during the three decades. Thus, novel antibiotics, knowledge in pathogenesis and better supportive care did not translate into measurably better outcome. It is conceivable that improvements over time in the management of meningitis are not visible in terms of an overall fatality rate, due to the selective decrease of those types of meningitis with good prognosis. The case fatality rate of meningitis due to *Haemophilus influenzae* and *Neisseria meningitidis* is low, namely 6% and 3%, respectively, whereas mortality due to pneumococcal and listerial meningitis is 21% and 15%, respectively [7]. Since vaccination against *Haemophilus influenzae* and *Neisseria meningitidis* is widely used nowadays, these etiologies have become rare. In contrast, the prevalence of etiologies associated with higher fatality rates (*Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *S. aureus*, *Listeria monocytogenes*) have not decreased. In addition, increasing resistance to beta-lactams of strains causing pneumococcal meningitis may counteract the improvement of supportive care. Thus, decreasing the overall fatality rate of meningitis now requires either an efficacious prophylaxis against high-risk meningitis (e.g. conjugated pneumococcal vaccine against a broad spectrum of capsular types) or better management of pneumococcal meningitis.

The prospective, randomized, double-blind trial of adjuvant therapy with dexamethasone in adults with bacterial meningitis shows that there is room for improved management (Table 1) [13]. Patients who profit from dexamethasone (10 mg every 6 h over 4 days, starting before or at the time of antibiotic therapy) are those with pneumococcal meningitis and with a Glasgow Coma Scale (GCS) score between 8–11. In this issue of *Intensive Care Medicine*, Flores-Cordero et al. [14] report their data of a prospective observational study of adult

patients with acute community-acquired bacterial meningitis. They report an impressively low overall fatality rate of 10.9%. Their rate of meningitis without identified pathogen was quite high (26.5%), probably due to the frequent use of antibiotics before microbiological sampling (29.6%). However, even the rate of unfavorable outcome (neurologic sequelae and death) of patients with pneumococcal meningitis was very low, at 16%, despite the fact that 12% of the isolates were non-susceptible to cefotaxime.

In their study, significant risk factors for adverse outcome were age over 50 years, neurologic abnormalities at admission, as well as a GCS of 10 or less and an APACHE II score higher than 13. Therefore, the good prognosis reported by Flores-Cordero et al. [14] was probably due to three factors: (1) low median age (46 years compared to 57 years in the study of Aronin et al. [3]), (2) low initial APACHE II score of 11.5 and (3) relatively high initial GCS of 11. Whereas the good initial clinical status was obviously due to a very high degree of suspicion by the general practitioner and the emergency room physician, the potential role of other factors cannot be answered with the data of this study. However, it is possible that rapid antimicrobial therapy was crucial, as suggested by Aronin et al. [3]. Unfortunately, the role of steroids and of supportive care in the intensive care unit cannot be estimated from this study, since the protocol did not control for these factors.

Despite the fact that the fatality rate of bacterial meningitis is finally decreasing, there is still need for improvement. Rapid hospitalization in cases of clinical suspicion of meningitis, microbiological sampling without delay, rapid treatment of selected patients with steroids, initiation of antimicrobial therapy as soon as possible and ICU hospitalization of patients with high APACHE II score or low GCS should be standard care. Whether further knowledge about the pathogenesis will result in successful adjuvant treatment modalities remains to be proven in clinical studies.

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